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ABSTRACT

This examination of South Africa's policy toward educating its black majority outlines major problems in South Africa's educational historiography and suggests possible explanations for the problems. Following a brief discussion of the nature of South Africa's language policy, the paper briefly analyzes the literature and concludes that (1) much of the work done on South Africa's language policy focuses on analyzing the relationship between English and Afrikaans, (2) little attention has been given to contemporary problems entailed in the choice of language(s) of instruction for blacks, (3) there has been an overemphasis on political history and corresponding disregard for social, economic, and cultural factors, (4) there has been an exclusion of blacks in historical works on South African education, and (5) there is a trend towards both mother-tongue instruction and bilingualism as official educational objectives. In response to critics who claim that South Africa's language policies have been designed as a way of perpetuating tribal divisions and cutting students off from the language required for employment and communication with the wider world, the author posits that we can gain a better understanding of the issue by relating the Afrikaaner's struggle for language rights to contemporary government education policies. Because language maintenance played such a pivotal role in the survival of the Afrikaaner community, perhaps South Africa's language policies have more to do with paternalistic benevolence than with racial separation. (LH)

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# "The 'Language Question' in the History of South African Education"

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of
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Division F, History and Historiography
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"The 'Language Question' in the History of South African Education"*

Issues of language and educational language policy often have important political and ideological overtones,[1] and nowhere has this been more true than in the case of South Africa. The relationship between Dutch (and later, Afrikaans) and English played a central role in the development of Afrikaner nationalism,[2] and continues to be a significant feature of life in South Africa.[3] Further, the contemporary implications of South African language policy--especially in the educational sphere--cannot be emphasized enough in any study of non-white schooling in the country. The 1976 Soweto township riots, which initially began as a result of resistance to government language policy,[4] clearly demonstrated the potentially explosive role of language.

It should be noted that the phrase "language question" is being used here in a somewhat broader sense than is the normal South African usage. In general, the term is used to refer specifically to the relationship between the two dominant European languages in South Africa (initially Dutch and English, now Afrikaans and English). Here, however, the term will be expanded to include not only this meaning, but also that of the question of the most appropriate language(s) for the education (both primary and advanced) of the black majority living in South Africa. This usage of the term is, I think, more defensible in that it serves to tie together a number of related historical and pedagogical issues whose interrelationship and interrelatedness might otherwise be (and often is) overlooked.

Matters of language policy in South Africa are, at root, primarily questions of educational policy, and discussions and historical treatments of the "language question" have traditionally taken place in the literature of the history of education. The evolution of the "language question" in South African history has been documented and examined in some detail by a number of educational historians. The central focus of their work has been analyzing the relationship between English and Dutch/Afrikaans, and this has been done, for the most part, in isolation from developments in non-White South African education.

Little attention has been given by these scholars to the more contemporary problems entailed in the choice of the language(s) of instruction for blacks, and the lack of an historical perspective has been, and continues to be, apparent in the work which has been done on this issue. Much of the published work on the "language question" in contemporary South African education has tended to be quite polemical in nature,[5] and has generally been concerned more with broader political questions (such as attacks on "apartheid," or, as it is now called, "separate development") than with language or educational issues per se. In a recent book examining language planning in South Africa, Heinz Kloss compellingly argues that:

> Approval or disapproval of a nation's racial, religious or socio-economic attitudes and policies must not, in the minds of sober men, be confounded with its achievements in the realm of language policy.[6]

This paper will attempt to apply this advice in analyzing and relating the two aspects of the "language question" in South African education already

discussed. It is hoped that the policies of the government with respect to the language of instruction in black education can be better understood when place in the historical context of the struggle between English and Dutch/Afrikaans.

In an essay entitled, "Leemtes in die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedskrywing" ["Deficiencies in South African Historiography"],[7] Spies raises a number of problems with modern South African history. South African historiography has been limited, he suggests, in three significant ways. First, as a consequence of historical Anglo-Boer hostility, there have evolved two distinct historiographic traditions in South Africa (viz., the English and the Afrikaans). The result has been "subjectively coloured . . . one-sided historiography."[8] There has also been, Spies argues, an over-emphasis on political history with a corresponding disregard for social, economic and cultural factors in South African history.[9] Last, South African history has tended, until quite recently, to focus on the history of the white communities in South Africa, to the exclusion (or misrepresentation) of the role of non-whites in the country's development.[10]

These deficiencies are even more apparent when we consider the literature on the history of South African education. The English historical tradition, represented in the work of Malherbe,[11] McKerron,[12] and Pells,[13] differs markedly, both in emphasis and interpretation, from that found in the Afrikaans tradition, represented in the work of Barnard[14] and Coetzee.[15] The sort of "lively debate" hoped for by Spies as the possible positive outcome of the two historical traditions, however, is lacking at least with respect to educational historiography in South Africa.

The presence of several histories of South African education might at first appear to offer a refutation of the claim that social, economic, and cultural factors (including education) are not given their due in South African historiography. However, little new work has been published since the 1930's, and standard reference works on the history of South African education--especially in English--are now so dated as to be, in at least some cases, almost laughable. The lack of interest in educational issues by South African historians can be seen in the limited attention give such matters in The Oxford History of South Africa,[16] as well as in the neglect of such topics in the Suid- Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal/South African Historical Journal. The result has been a virtual stagnation in the history of South African education.

The exclusion of non-whites in historical works on South African education can be explained, therefore, in large part by the works' dated nature. Nonetheless, even more contemporary work routinely concerns itself solely with white education--sometimes blatantly and without explanation, as in Barnard's Blanke-Onderwys in Transvaal in Histories-Pedogogiese Perspektief [White Education in Transvaal in Historical-Pedagogical Perspective].[17] Only Malherbe's most recent companion volume to his 1925 landmark work has seriously sought to address the historical development of education for all of the groups in South Africa[18]--and even this work leaves much to be desired.

With respect to the "language question," what we find in histories of South African education is a general recognition of its importance for the European (white) community, and of the trend toward both mother-tongue instruction and bilingualism as an official educational objective. The key here, I think, is the close identification which developed between the

language of the Afrikaner community and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism.[19] It was their struggle for survival as a cultural and linguistic community which served to unite and strengthen the Afrikaner people, and an essential component of this struggle took place over the "language medium" question in education.

This is the point at which historians of South African education stop--no connections are made to relate the Afrikaner's struggle for language rights to contemporary government educational policies directed to the various non-white communities. Rather, discussion and critique of such programs are left to others, and it is here, as we shall see, that the problem lies.

Education for blacks in the Republic of South Africa is controlled by the Department of Education and Training, while for those in the "homelands" there are reasonably autonomous education departments. Within the Republic, the official educational language policy (as delineated in the Education and Training Act of 1979) provides for the use of the child's mother tongue as the medium of instruction through Standard 2 (the fourth year of schooling).[20] After this point, one of the Republic's two official languages (normally English) is used as the medium of instruction, and the other is taught as a subject. The replacement of the mother tongue with English (or more rarely, Afrikaans) as the medium of instruction has been defended with the argument that:

> . . . education through the medium of the vernacular, which as yet is not sufficiently developed to cope with modern scientific terminology, could be detrimental to advancement in a technological age.[21]

Somewhat surprisingly, the objections to the government's language policy have been not to the gradual imposition of English, but rather to the use of the mother tongue in early primary education. This is especially odd given the broadly-based international support for vernacular language instruction. UNESCO has, on a number of occasions, asserted both that "pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue" and that "the use of the mother tongue [should] be extended to as late a stage in education as possible."[22] Indeed, this approach has been adopted in a number of African states, which seek to begin instruction in indigenous languages and continue in former colonial languages (primarily French and English).[23]

Critics of the government's language policy, however, contend that while mother tongue education in other places is intended to be, and is in fact, progressive in nature, such is not the case in South Africa.[24] In South Africa, they contend, these policies have been designed as a way of "perpetuating tribal divisions"[25] and encouraging the process of "retribalization" among the nation's blacks. Further, by delaying the introduction of English, the schools effectively cut students off from the language necessary both for employment and for communication with the "wider world" (including other South African blacks).[26]

These are compelling arguments, and no doubt have much validity. I am not, though, convinced that they are more telling in the case of South Africa than they might be elsewhere--nor am I certain that they are as socially and pedagogically indefensible as is commonly assumed. There may well be stronger counter-arguments possible. It strikes me that the critics have identified a place where the South African regime is "between a rock and a hard place." By

encouraging mother tongue instruction, the South African government is seeking to further oppress and divide black South Africa; the alternative would leave them open to charges of cultural and linguistic imperialism--if not genocide. I think that this is where Kloss' advice might come in useful: however much we detest apartheid and officially-sanctioned racism, language policies should be, in the case of South Africa as in all cases, evaluated in as objective a fashion as we can manage.

If the mother tongue policy is not to be explained simply as yet another component of the government's stated goal of "separate development," what then can explain it? The historical importance of language for the Afrikaner community may provide a key in answering this question. It may well be the case that the policy is explicable in terms which have more to do with paternalistic benevolence (offensive as this might be) on the part of the Afrikaner-dominated government than with a concern with racial separation. Language maintenance played a pivotal role in the survival of the Afrikaner community; it would seem strange for them to seek the oppression of another group by attempting to ensure the survival and growth of their linguistic heritage.

In conclusion, in this paper a general outline of a major problem in South African educational historiography has been offered, and a possible alternative to mainstream explanations of the problem has been suggested. We began with a discussion of the nature of the "language question" in South African education, and followed this discussion with an analysis of the treatment of the "language question" in South African historiography. In the final section of the paper, the contemporary ramifications of the issue for black education in South Africa were presented, together with alternative historical explanations for the policies adopted by the government.

## Notes

* The research for this paper was conducted while I was a Visiting Scholar at Stanford University, during the summer of 1983.

1. See, for example, Chris Kennedy, ed., Language Planning and Language Education (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).
2. See T. Dunbar Moodie, The Rise of Afrikanerdom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 39-51.
3. See L. W. Lanham and K. P. Prinsloo, eds., Language and Communication Studies in South Africa (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978).
4. See John A. Marcum, Education, Race and Social Change in South Africa (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
5. See, for example, Agrippah T. Mugamba and Mougo Nyaggah, eds., Independence Without Freedom: The Political Economy of Colonial Education in Southern Africa (Oxford: ABC-Clio, 1980); Freda Troup, Forbidden Pastures: Education Under Apartheid (London: IDAF, 1976); and Brian Bunting, Education for Apartheid (London: South Africa Education Fund, 1966).
6. Heinz Kloss, Problems of Language Policy in South Africa (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumuller, 1978), p. 10.
7. F. J. Du T. Spies, "Leemtes in die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedskrywing," Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal 3 (November 1971): 82-92.
8. Ibid., p. 82. See also Michael Banton, Racial and Ethnic Competition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 209-210.
9. Spies, "Leemtes," p. 86.
10. Ibid, pp. 87-88.

11. Ernst G. Malherbe, Education in South Africa: 1652-1922, volume 1 (1925; Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1975); idem, Education in South Africa: 1923-1975 (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1977).

12. M. E. McKerron, A History of Education in South Africa: 1652-1932 (Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik, 1934).

13. E. G. Pells, 300 Years of Education in South Africa (Cape Town: Juta & Co., 1954).

14. S. S. Barnard, Blanke-Onderwys in Transvaal in Histories-Pedagogiese Perspektief (Durban: Butterworth, 1979).

15. J. C. Coetzee, Onderwys in Suid-Afrika, 1652-1960 (Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik, 1963).

16. Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds., The Oxford History of South Africa: I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); idem, eds., The Oxford History of South Africa: II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

17. Bernard, Blanke-Onderwys.

18. See also A. L. Behr, New Perspectives in South African Education (Reprinted with Supplement) (Durban: Butterworth, 1978).

19. See Moodie, Rise of Afrikanerdom; Andre Du Toit and Hermann Giliomee, Afrikaner Political Thought, volume 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 24-25.

20. See South Africa, 1983: Official Yearbook of the Republic of South Africa (Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg, 1983), p. 691.

21. Quoted in Behr, New Perspectives, p. 177.

22. UNESCO, The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education (Paris: UNESCO, 1953), pp. 47-48.

23. See Ayo Bamgbose, Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience (Paris: UNESCO, 1976).

24. Troup, Forbidden Pastures, pp. 34-35. Also see Bunting, Education for Apartheid, p. 14.

25. Troup, Forbidden Pastures, p. 34.

26. See Pierre L. van den Berghe, "Language and 'Nationalism' in South Africa," Race 9, 1 (1967): 37-46.

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